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AUTHOR Nickisch, Craig W.
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ABSTRACT

A simplified pattern of noun formation is outlined that can assist the German teacher in helping students understand constituent relationships in long or obscure German nouns, providing an overview of significant patterns that covers a relatively complete noun system. First, significant patterns in nouns outside the process of formation, and changes over time, are briefly noted. Various processes of noun formation are then distinguished, including conversion, combination (prefixes and suffixes), compounding (determinative, coordinative, and idiomatic), variation in linking elements, agglutination, shortened forms (clipped, acronyms, and abbreviations), and special formations, often because of specific linguistic phenomena. (MSE)

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Craig W. Nickisch, U.S.M.A., West Point
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German Noun Formation: Considerations for the Language Teacher

So lernt ich traurig den verzicht:
Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht·
- Stefan George

Close observation of written work and oral responses from intermediate and advanced students of German has demonstrated that communicative difficulties arise, with surprising frequency, from nouns. Nouns, of course, show little linguistic redundancy and the requirement for accuracy is therefore relatively high. Students identify German nouns as a problem which arises early, while German is still being learned on the basis of native language structures.[1] Difficulties with nouns continue well into intermediate and advanced study, where the student transitions to learning based on the German patterns themselves. At that stage the serious student wants not only to speak German, but also to speak about German.

It is the goal of this paper to present the German system of noun formation in a pedagogically useful fashion, offering the teacher an overview of significant patterns. A simple but relatively complete system is of particular value when a serious student, responding to laudable intellectual drives, asks: "Why?" An outline of the German noun formation patterns is appended. English, a Germanic language itself, uses virtually the same noun formation patterns, if not always with the same results. The

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teacher of beginning students finds referring to the English parallel a useful, if temporary, device.

German has the well deserved reputation of constructing unpronounceably long nouns. Furthermore, the semantic center of the German sentence is shifting perceptibly from verb to noun. This tendency has been called 'Verhauptwortung, Hauptwörtersprache, Hauptwörtlichkeit, Verbalphobie, Hauptwörterkrankheit, Verbalaufschwemmung, Hauptwörterei, Umschreibungssucht, Hauptwortseuche, Dingwortseuche, Hauptwortsucht' and even 'Substantivomanie.'[2]

A 'word,' like the aroma of carnations, is often more easily recognized than described.[3] Many apparently free morphemes also occur as bound forms: ein Topf, Eintopf. Long constructions, the 'tapeworm words,' are also words: Panzeraufklärungsverbände, Nasalspirantengesetze. Mark Twain, expressing the sentiment of more than one student of German, calls this "one of the most curious and notable features...the length of German words. Some German words are so long they have a perspective...(they) are not words, they are alphabetical processions."[4]

Nouns Outside the Process of 'Formation'

Not all nouns are formed, strictly speaking. Many **original German nouns** have been nouns for literally thousands of years: Kuh, Wolf, Eiche. Through **semantic shifts** an old noun may be applied to a new item, based on some perceived

correspondence of characteristics: Elektrizität - Strom, Baustellenaufzug - Hexe. The logic is not always obvious. These shifts occur in several ways, often over a long period of time. 'Schildern' used to mean 'to paint shields' and a 'Degen' was the knight himself. The original meaning may remain while a new meaning was acquired: 'lesen' is an example in 'Trauben lesen' and 'Bücher lesen.' Nouns, probably more frequently than other parts of speech, are borrowed from other languages: Klimakterium, Taxi, Politik, Sport. Grammatical gender in German seems to be determined by one of a number of factors: German's synonym (der Hit), gender in the original language (das Museum), sensed actual gender (der Boss), German morphological rules (der Laser), or as a new morpheme itself (das Team). The last of these 'exceptions' is **invention.** New words are simply coined: Schlümpfe, Gas, Futsch. As in English (sludge, gunk, smurf, shmoo), this process is active in slang or colloquial speech, but relatively few of the coinages achieve wide and lasting acceptance.

Formation of German Nouns

German noun formation is a series of processes, each quite understandable, depicted in chart form in the appendix. Here applied linguistics has real application to teaching; it furnishes a basis for explanation, even offering a system, suitably simplified, for reference.

Conversion occurs when other parts of speech are used, without morphological change, as nouns.[5] Examples from

adjectives: das Tief, der Laut, das Übel, der Stolz. Practically any infinitive can be converted to a noun: das Treffen, das Auseinanderwachsen. English, using the same system, arrives at a different result: to cheat - the cheat, to find - the find. Inflected verb forms may also be converted to nouns. From the preterite: der Band, der Schnitt. From the root: der Fall, das Grab, der Lauf. From participles (if not in every inflected form): der Fortgeschrittene.

One or more bound morphemes added to a free morpheme form a noun through **combination**; the student sees this as the addition of one or more prefixes or suffixes. Many prefixes are virtually identical in both languages (un-, be-, anti-) and many suffixes are also similar: (-schaft/-ship, -ei/-(e)y, -ismus/-ism). **Suffixation** creates nouns in several distinct ways. The first of these, **expansion**, occurs when a suffix causes no change in part of speech and only a modification in semantic content. The change may be in size and age: Hund - Hündchen. Or it may result in a noun of the opposite sex: Arzt - Ärztin, Koch - Köchin.[6] Foreign loan words do not take the umlaut: Sklav - Sklavin. **Functional derivation** occurs when the suffix causes a change in part of speech, leaving semantic content largely unmodified: umleiten - die Umleitung. **Semantic derivation** changes not only the part of speech, but also the semantic content: fahren - die Fuhre. Suffixation may cause stark changes and obscure the original meaning: schonen - die Schonung, die Zeit - die Zeitung.

Prefixion results in a semantically changed derivative, but its part of speech generally is unaffected: Sinn - Unsinn, Wort - Vorwort, Rede - Gerede. More than one prefix and suffix may of course occur in the same noun: Unannehmlichkeiten. Nouns may themselves function as prefixes (Haupt-, Grund-, Spitzen-) and the same is true of other parts of speech such as prepositions (An-, Gegen-, Vor-, Zwischen-). The teacher may want to consider these under the next category.

Compounding results in a noun which is made up of two or more free morphemes, perhaps with bound morphemes included as well. The simplest compounds are made up of two constituents. The first, for instance, may be a noun (Magenbitter, Hausmeister), an adjective (Kleinstadt, Hochmut), an adverb (Gleichschaltung, Abgase) or a verbal morpheme (Fahrstuhl, Singstunde). Among the relatively common **determinative compounds** the final element carries the basic semantic content which is modified by the earlier constituent(s), whose order is strictly fixed: 'Faßbier' is hardly 'Bierfaß' and a 'Blumentopf' is quite distinct from 'Topfblumen.' German readily tacks additional modifying constituents onto the beginning of compounds:

Funk + Verbindung
See + Funk + Verbindung
über + See + Funk + Verbindung

Twain complains, with justification, that this "is a great distress to the new student (who) turns to the dictionary for help, but there is no help there. The dictionary must draw the

line somewhere - so it leaves this sort of words out. And it is right, because these long things are hardly legitimate words,... and the inventor of them ought to have been killed."[7]
But an 'Oberweichselbinnenschiffahrtgesellschaftsfinanzdirektor' will surely turn out to be some kind of 'Direktor.' English prosody distinguishes between syntagmas and compounds: 'blackbird' and 'German teacher' are compounds; 'black bird' and 'German teacher' are syntagmas.

Less common are **coordinative compounds** in which [redacted] described person or item is really both elements simultaneously: Königinmutter, Dichterkomponist, Strumpfhose. This kind of compound in English is often written with a hyphen: gentleman-farmer, secretary-stenographer.

Idiomatic compounds sometimes take on such specific meanings as to obscure the relationship between the constituents: Vatermörder, Prokischreiber, Hubschrauber. Indeed, the meaning of such a compound is only generally linked to that of its constituents.

Vestiges of earlier grammatical inflections, which modern German has probably lost, occur commonly when the first constituent of a compound is a noun or a verbal morpheme. These **linking elements** are of more interest in advanced German, but the bright student will soon notice that not every 'Landsmann' is also a 'Landmann,' and will then ask what difference there is between 'Mondshein' and 'Mondenschein,' and how 'Mannesstimmen' can be differentiated from 'Männerstimmen.' Some linking elements

are, by analogy, used where they would never have arisen through normal grammatical inflections: Liebesbrief. But few real difficulties arise from the misuse of linking elements. A briefcase made from 'Schweinsleder' is nearly as well described as being made of '*Schweineleder,' or even '*Schweinenleder.'

Certain syntagmas are perceived as so closely bonded that they **agglutinate** into a single word: Handvoll, Dankeschön, Lebewohl, Taugenichts, Vaterunser. Objects, often in nature, are: Stehaufmännchen, Vergißmeinnicht, Rührmichnichtan. Students will recall similar agglutinations in English: mouthful, will-o-the-wisp, jack-in-the-pulpit. Syntagmas may also be agglutinated through literary license: Meersternichdichgrüße, Gegrüßtseistdumaria.[8]

German, as in English, uses **shortened forms**, especially in jargons. Three truncated or **clipped forms** exist, named according to which part of the word remains. "Kopfwörter": Taxi(metre), Labor(atorium), Ober(kellner), Auto(mobil), Uni(versität). "Klammerwörter": Atom(kraft)antrieb, Mo(torho)tel, Linol(eum)schnitt. "Rumpfwörter": (Omni)bus, (Violon)cello. English appears to have a center form: (in)flu(enza). And Günter Grass can eclectically form: die Vergegenkunft.[9] Clipped forms, common in business language, can of course inflect and combine: Schu(tz)ko(ntakt)stecker, Per(borat)sil(ikat). Initial-compounds occur: U-Bahn, US-Regierung, ABC-Waffen. With "Esso" (= S.O. = Standard Oil) we reach a transition to the ever more common **acronym** which even

native speakers may use without quite knowing just what the initials stand for. The simplest of this group are read letter-for-letter as grapheme strings: PKW, LKW, VEB. But DEFA, NATO and PEN must be read as phoneme strings. They are indeed 'words.' Such acronyms are soon written with lower case: Flak, Pak, Hapag, Stuka. They are easily borrowed: Radar (radio detection and ranging), Laser (light amplification by simulated emission of radiation). These borrowings can then be compounded: Radarortung, Laserstrahl.

The last shortened form is the **abbreviation**: Frl., Fam., Hptm. Even loan words may be abbreviated: cand. phil., Dr. h. c. If this distresses the student of German, the teacher may want to point out a similar difficulty in English by asking the student to spell the word abbreviated to 'Mrs.'

Special formations are words which do not fit another category; they are often formed on the basis of specific linguistic phenomena. Children's speech: Po, Mama, Haje-Haje, Hoppe-Hoppe. Onomatopoeia: Kikiriki, Tschingderingdsching, Pinkepinke. Reduplication: Kindeskind, Helfershelfer. Or assonance: Mischmasch, Zickzack. Blends carry semantic content from two words and often demonstrate remarkable linguistic creativity: Medizyniker,[10] jein.[11]

In Conclusion

Noun formation, keeping stride with our continually and ever more rapidly changing environments, is a dynamic undertaking.

New nouns appear daily, giving expression to new achievements, events and fresh human experience. The formation of nouns to describe these widely divergent phenomena, however, is accomplished by a surprisingly limited number of linguistic processes. The teacher who understands and derives practical advantages from these processes will have to decide when to what extent the system itself is an object of instruction; consideration of that question is beyond the scope of this paper. Today, as in Twain's time, dictionaries do not, indeed they cannot, list every possible noun. Students who must decipher constituent relationships in long or obscure German nouns should be able to look to a teacher who is familiar with the systems of the target language and who can furnish perspective, information and support. The simplified pattern of noun formation suggested here has served well in just that kind of instructional situation.

Appendix

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*                                       *
*        GERMAN NOUN FORMATION          *
*                                       *
*     Conversion                        *
*                                       *
*     Combination                       *
*        Suffixation                    *
*           Expansion                   *
*           Functional Derivation       *
*           Semantic Derivation         *
*        Prefixion                      *
*                                       *
*     Compounding                       *
*        Determinative Compounds        *
*        Coordinative Compounds         *
*        Idiomatic Compounds            *
*        (Linking Elements)             *
*                                       *
*      Agglutination                    *
*                                       *
*      Shortened Forms                  *
*         Clipping                      *
*         Acronyms                      *
*         Abbreviations                 *
*                                       *
*      Special Formations               *
*                                       *
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Endnotes

1 Cf. Gunther Bischoff, **Speak you English** (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1974).

2 Karlheinz Daniels, **Substantivierungstendenzen in der deutschen Gegenwartssprache: Nominaler Ausbau des verbalen Denkkreises** (Düsseldorf: Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann, 1963), p. 10.

3 Paul Grebe, u.a., **Duden: Grammatik der deutschen Gegenwartssprache**, Bd. 4 (Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1973), p. 60, also Hans Marchand, **Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word-Formation: A Synchronic-Diachronic Approach** (München: C.H.Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969), p. 1.

4 Mark Twain, "The Awful German Language, in **The Complete Humorous Sketches and Tales of Mark Twain**, Charles Neider, ed. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 448-449.

5 A derivational 'Zero-Morpheme' would be invisible, of course.

6 The term 'expansion' includes suffixal processes which, although linguistically distinct, may be grouped together for simplicity and clarity.

7 Twain, p. 449.

8 Günter Grass, **Die Blechtrommel**, 14. Aufl. (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1979), p. 216.

9 Günter Grass, **örtlich betäubt** (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1969), passim.

10 Wolfgang Fleischer, **Wortbildung der deutschen Gegenwartssprache**, 4. Aufl. (Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1976), p. 236.

11 Kurt Tucholsky, **Zwischen gestern und morgen, eine Auswahl aus seinen Schriften und Gedichten** (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1961), p. 111.

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